THE VIRTUE OF DOUBT
John 3:1-17
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Gerald J. Gregg
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

You know the story of Adam and Eve, of course. Life in the Garden of Eden had been a bed of roses: only the two of them to enjoy the bounties of a luxuriant nature which lavishly met their every need with no effort on their part. But now everything was in turmoil. They had been kicked out of the Garden, their cozy protection was gone, and now they were forced to struggle for survival. Seeing Eve's tears and trying to make sense of it all, Adam said to her, "Well, dear, we just have to get used to living in this time of rapid social change."

If there is humor in that apocryphal story, it is because Adam's words are wildly anachronistic. After all, that is the way we talk about our world, our time. If there is one thing we can be absolutely sure of, it is that we are caught up in rapid change.

It seems pretty well established that you and I are living in one of the in-between periods of history, in a time of transition. One world is dying while another is strugglir to be born. Old secure fences are down, many old comfortable patterns of life have been cast aside, many old attitudes once assumed by all just don't mean a thing any more. The world is in ferment. Nothing is accepted at face value. Every principle, every axiom, is being challenged. One author summed it up this way: "Yesterday people lived with a sense of guilt. Today they live with a sense of doubt. A revolutionary age is ushering in a new skepticism."

For many in our skeptical age the idea of God is irrelevant. Even some church members question if Christianity has the answer. In popular opinion the mantle of the prophets and apostles has been transferred to the spokesmen for science. Today's high priests are economists and physicists and other research experts. To our sophisticated, scientific, nuclear age religious faith seems unreal, unreasonable, unrealistic. Doubts grow like weeds. We have doubt about values, doubt about moral standards, doubt about the very meaning of life, doubt about the truth of the Bible, doubt about God's existence. In an age of nuclear bombs and constant revolutions, in a world running amok in Iran and Afghanistan and who knows what will blow up next, how can we believe there really is a God at the helm? For a Christian living in such a time, the simple faith of childhood is profoundly challenged by doubts.

The result of living in such a world with questions and challenges on every side is chronic anxiety. I suspect television Channel 34 has recognized that anxiety in its new programming at 6:00. If the evening news on the other channels gives you indigestion at dinner time, now you can flip away from the news to 34 and laugh at the lightest of English comedians with "Dave Allen at Large".

I predict a large audience for Dave Allen. After all, who wants to be exposed to more of the grim news picture? The impulse is very strong to pull back and try our best to escape from the anxiety. We are tempted to act like the Arab herdsman out in the desert. He awakened one night in his tent about midnight and was very hungry. So the Arab lit a candle and reached for the bowl of dates near his bed. He took one date out, held it up to the candlelight, saw that there was a worm in it, and tossed the date aside. Then he reached for another date,held it to the light, saw a worm, and in anger threw that date clear out of the tent. The tired, hungry man paused to think it over for a moment. Then he blew out the candle and proceeded to eat the whole bowl of dates in the dark. With so much confusion and doubt around us, it is very tempting just to grope through life in the dark.

What does the Christian faith have to say to this state of affairs?

Our scripture lesson tells how one day Jesus of Nazareth came upon a man of doubts. Nicodemus was a ruler of the Jews, one of the respected elder statesmen, a well known teacher of the faith. He was the very model of a good and wise man. He had heard of Jesus and knew something about His teachings. He could not accept all he had heard and yet he couldn't turn his back either. So he cautiously comes to see Jesus at night, when no one would see him there, and they have a long conversation. Jesus tells Nicodemus about true life, being born again into the Kingdom of God with the assistance of the Holy Spirit. And Nicodemus replies in amazement: "How on earth can things like this happen?"

A careful reading of our scripture passage shows Jesus made clear to Nicodemus two basic facts. The first was an assurance; the second was a warning.

First, Jesus made clear that doubt may be an open door to greater certainty. Honest, open doubt may be one of the most rewarding and enriching experiences of our life. Peace of mind comes not by ignoring doubt, but by facing it without fear or shame. It is a basic axiom that truth cannot be diminished by honest doubt and questioning; truth shines through all the brighter.

Doubt is a necessary part of progress. Many centuries ago, people in Europe knew with absolute certainty that the country of Portugal was the farthest west you could travel. So Portugal adopted as its national motto the Latin words "Ne Plus Ultra",which means "nothing more beyond". Everyone knew it was true. But a man named Columbus doubted it and a whole new world was discovered because of his doubt.

Doubt is a part of progress even in human relationships. Take courtship, for instance. Boy and girl date, fall in love, become engaged, plan the wedding. But as the date approaches, each one has some doubts, both wonder if they have made the right decision: "Is this only infatuation? Can we make a go of it? Is our love really permanent?" And then one evening they sit down and tell each other their doubts. In the end, if it is real love, their love becomes far stronger because they doubted.

It works that way in religion. When Nicodemus came with his doubts, Jesus was not impatient, did not brush him aside, but instead sat with him in the night until the light broke for Nicodemus and he became certain. The sequel to the story is that in the end Nicodemus risked his reputation, his name, his great prestige to follow Jesus. His honest doubt led to deep faith.

The strongest believers have also been great doubters. Take Martin Luther, the founder of Protestantism. He was a positive, courageous, vital man. He also had periods of severe doubting. There was one time when his doubt was especially deep and he moped around in utter depression. So his wife, Katie, dressed all in black, in funeral clothes, and walked into Luther's study. He looked up and his face showed he was shocked to see her dressed that way. She said, "I am mourning the death of God. From the way you behave, God must surely be dead." In a few minutes we will be singing Luther's triumphant hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God". As we sing his strong words of faith, remember they were written by one of history's great doubters.

I think that the open questioning of faith is one of the most hopeful signs of our times. It shows that people are groping for deeper answers, thinking, searching. For many, doubts have stripped away their childish notions of God, their juvenile conceptions of religion. And high time, I say. It does no honor to Christianity to encounter an intelligent adult, highly educated and well versed in other areas of life, but who has

never gorwn beyond what he learned in the third grade Sunday School class. Today's questioning and doubting may be the sign of a future growth in religion. Sincere doubt can be an open door to deep faith, as Jesus indicated to Nicodemus.

But Jesus also made clear a second fact, a warning about doubt: The human intelligence, our doubting, is not the basic measure for life. There is much, much more. So He told Nicodemus: "The wind blows where it likes, and you can hear the sound of it but you have no idea where it comes from or where it goes. Nor can you tell how a man is born by the wind of the Spirit."

We live in a world of mystery. There is so much that is unknowable, in spite of our science. Albert Schweitzer wrote, "The highest knowledge is to know we are surrounded by mystery." You see, if I say I will not believe until all doubt is removed, then I am simply trying to reduce God to the level of my human intelligence.

In religion there are deep, dark puzzles. The Apostle Paul said, "We see through a glass darkly." There was even a time of doubt where we would least expect it when Jesus said, "My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" Religion is not a formal garden with carefully arranged beds of petunias, lilies and roses and well manicured lawns. Instead, religion is a wild, windblown field with pools so deep they cannot be fathomed, with flowers so rare they have never been catalogued.

A person cannot think his way to God by logic, by puncture-proof arguments. God is simply above the level of human logic. So no truly thoughtful person will ever come up to the place where all intellectual doubts are completely satisfied. Abraham Lincoln was quite right: "Accept all you can by reason and the rest by faith, and you will live and die a better man."

There well may be some things about religion which a person cannot accept or believe; there may be many things. But my experience with people is that there is much more that they <u>can</u> accept and then move ahead from that point. That is what they should concentrate on instead of letting their doubts completely block their lives.

For all of us there are times when life gets us down, depressed, times when doubts keep crowding in on us, when it is touch and go, when the world is too much for us. My personal experience compels me to say that that is precisely when God is most powerfully at our side, the same God who loves us so much that He gave His son to bring faith to this troubled world.

Amen.

Thank you, O God, for constantly reaching out Your love to us, even though we cannot fully understand, even though at times we question and deny Your power. Help us to see more clearly that You are our strong fortress amid all the world's uncertainty and turmoil. Lead us to go with you in trust far beyond our limited ability to reason, because You have given us the Christ.

Amen.